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AUTHOR Howington, Cynthia
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ABSTRACT

Perhaps because of their familiarity with joke telling, students often do their best writing when using humor. In both telling jokes and creating humorous works, students need to develop a strong sense of audience, an awareness of the importance of vivid description, a strong sense of purpose, and the ability to use punctuation for effect. The humorous writing assignment not only helps students develop these skills, but also provides young writers with instant feedback. Once papers are read aloud in class, students know whether they have succeeded or not, and to what degree. After students have gained an awareness of audience, purpose, and style through the humorous writing assignment, they can apply these skills to other forms of writing. While not a panacea for all the problems of writing instruction, the use of humor is an effective and highly motivating composing strategy. (HTH)

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WIT AND THE CONSCIOUS: USING HUMOR
AS A COMPOSING STRATEGY

Cynthia Howington

"There are only two types of teachers. The first type of teacher may teach math or science or art. We'll refer to them as the normal teacher. The second type is the English teacher.

The regular teacher's personality is vague. The student never really gets to know him. English teachers, however, have very definite, though perhaps strange, personalities. They can find a deep moral or message in anything. Have you ever heard a math teacher talk about the sexual nature of the Pythagorean theorem?"

My student makes his point about English teachers, but the quality of his writing makes another point. Humorous writings are often students' best works. How often in marking a set of mediocre papers have you noticed that the few really good papers are humorous? Because I had noticed that the outstanding work in my composition classes were often by writers at wit, I attempted to analyze what makes these papers better and to use my findings to encourage good writing from my more prosaic students.

From the beginning, I found that my students were very receptive to creating humorous pieces. Perhaps one reason for their reaction is that students are on familiar ground when they write humor. For while teachers bemoan their students' lack of experience with the written word, there is a rhetorical mode with which most students are familiar--the joke. Even students who cannot read the directions on Campbell's soup cans know how to tell a joke. True, occasionally there is a student whose joke-telling ability is on the level of the student who told me that Honeymoon Salad is "lettuce all by itself." After a quizzical look from me, she blushed and amended her definition to "lettuce alone." But most students are good at joke and anecdote telling; just let them get you off the subject in class, and you'll quickly discover this ability. Theirs is a very useful ability for teachers to tap in a composition class. Many skills a joke or anecdote teller uses are the same ones used to create a humorous, or any piece, of writing. But in a humorous piece the effects these skills produce, and therefore the need for them, is often more apparent.

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A strong sense of audience. My students know which jokes not to tell me. And they know how to adapt their jokes to their audiences: how to change obscenities to euphemisms, how to draw on familiar settings and people to give the listener a sense of immediacy (note that Aggie jokes just change affiliations around the country), how to change their slang so the older generation will get it. In writing about the importance of audience awareness, James Britton observed that "in traditional educational procedures where school writings are concerned, the answer to Who is it for? must usually be the teacher."¹ But student humorists broaden their audience beyond the teacher. In my class, I always share writings, so students perceive the class, and by extension, their fellow students, as an audience. Because they are searching for a tangible reaction in other people, they are aware of the existence of an audience and, therefore, address it. Humorous assignments move students, because they are entertaining others, away from what Moffett calls "egocentered writing" to "decentered writing."²

Also, an awareness of the importance of vivid description. The joke teller's choice of words is crucial. Remember the Honeymoon Salad. So many humorous anecdotes rely on a vivid picture of a character or an event; details must be well-chosen. The paradoxical side of this necessity is that details in humorous pieces are often easier to choose because they are exaggerated. Erma Bombeck's problems are never small: putting money in a parking meter is as difficult for her as holding a press conference without a one-liner is for President Reagan. Why this exaggeration is easier than understatement or straight description, I do not know. I do know my experience has shown me that most students can paint a caricature in words. These two exaggerated descriptions by students bear me out:

This one is from a paper in which the writer defines the slang term "geek": "Every once in a while I have the unfortunate displeasure of meeting someone who simply cannot be described in everyday words. To call this person 'peculiar' or 'odd' is like calling a 500 lb. man 'pudgy.'"

And this one comes from a description of unattainable women who make men suffer: "Killers want to know how big your father's stock portfolio is and whether or not you have a sister named Muffy who was queen of the debutante ball last year."

As with joke-tellers, the humorist has a strong sense of purpose. James Kinneavy claims, "Purpose in discourse is all important. The aim of discourse determines everything else

in the process."³ Although the student humorist may have a thesis to develop, he also has a tangible reaction that he expects--smiles and laughter. He knows that each detail, rhythm, and phrase must contribute to his desired effect--to be funny. The oft-seen ambivalence of those comparison/contrast papers that never make a point is avoided. If at first your students write papers which are solely to entertain, those papers have a noble purpose. The writer of this paragraph, a comparison, has a clear sense of purpose and is using rhythms and details to make her point:

"Type A wakes up 2 1/2 to 3 hours before class time. He has a good nutritious breakfast, takes time fixing his hair, reviews his lessons from the night before, and gets to school in time to get a prime parking space. Type F jumps out of bed, runs through the shower, grabs a doughnut or a slice of cold pizza, hangs his head out of the car window to dry his hair, parks under a 'No Parking' sign, and has no idea that homework was even assigned."

Humorous papers are good for teaching the glories of punctuation--instead of merely the mechanics of it. Just as a joke teller uses dramatic pauses, so does the humorist use punctuation. Here is a natural opportunity for showing students that the dash can give emphasis to a following word or phrase and that position equals power. For humorous papers also lend themselves to a discussion of arrangement as a means of creating tension, building suspense, and achieving emphasis, because so many humorous pieces demand these qualities in such a pronounced way. For example, this student uses punctuation and arrangement to create tension in her comparison of two types of travellers: "Type A is a member of an auto club, and he has the car tuned-up and checked before leaving town. Type Z does not have a spare tire."

One point I am making here is that I can think of no other genre that calls for such an awareness of TECHNIQUE.

Aside from these technical aspects of the humorous paper that lend themselves to good pedagogy, one other advantage of the humorous assignment must be included in this discussion: instant feedback. Since the measure of students' success is clearly observable, once papers are read aloud in class, they know whether they have succeeded or not. And they know to what degree. And my experience shows that if instructed to "write funny," most students will get positive feedback and be encouraged to work harder.

A DISCLAIMER: This approach is not a panacea for all our problems. Furthermore, I do not have my students write solely humorous pieces. However, I do think that using humor as a composing strategy has a definite place in the curriculum. It is best to begin with these pieces. They are not easy assignments, but they do lend themselves to a concrete discussion of technique. In fact, I think these humorous pieces, because of their exaggeration, get students to "think technique." I usually begin with short pieces and concentrate on teaching use of specific detail, arrangement, subordination, and punctuation. For example, one exercise I particularly like is to ask students to imitate "A Minute With Andy Rooney." I give them a model to follow; we discuss what makes it work: who he is speaking to, how details make the difference, how he achieves emphasis, etc. Then I suggest similar subjects and ask the students to "write funny." (Many of the examples I've read are imitations of Rooney.)

Another writer who uses exaggeration well and is imitable is Erma Bombeck. In fact, after a discussion of student imitations of Bombeck, my students learned (Al Haig style) to Bombeckize their writings. One beginning version: "Type A pushes his items along neatly in a shopping cart. Type B tries to carry all his merchandise and ends up dropping it all several times."

and after Bombeckization:

"Type A pushes his neatly arranged items along in his shopping cart. Type B overloads his arms with merchandise, juggling it all the way to the counter, where he ends up soaking his leaf lettuce under a jar of broken pickles."

After the class has done several short humorous pieces, I move into our school's standard composition program, following rhetorical modes. I no longer require students to write humorous papers, but I keep re-iterating the techniques with which we began our semester's study. Many students keep writing humorous papers; others do not. But all students are more aware of the need for specific support and for a sense of purpose and audience. Their consciousness of an audience is particularly gratifying because even though they may no longer be writing for laughs, they retain an awareness of the benefits of entertaining their readers. This excerpt from a paper written after finishing our humorous assignments reflects that awareness. The writer is comparing her luxury car to a friend's economy car: "As I sat there, my knees tucked under my chin, I realized that there was not enough room for such extras as spacious floorboards, padded seats and doors, or armrests--there was barely enough room for me!"

I began with a student description of English teachers. The

description goes on to say: "We must, however, look upon English teachers with some respect. After all, look what terrible hardships they endure. Normal teachers take home their multiple choice tests and grade them. English teachers have to muddle through pages of sentences of 'Does the rightfully suggest the implications of the dead Oedipus?' and other profound statements written by students at 4 o'clock in the morning before the paper is due."

Yes, we do endure hardships, but it is my hope that after using humor as a composing strategy, your students will not only use vivid details and masterly syntax, but also have a sense of purpose and audience, and that you will read fewer "Does the rightfully suggest the implications of the dead Oedipus?" papers.

NOTES

¹James Britton, "The Functions of Writing" in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, eds. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), p. 15.

²James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1968), p. 6.

³James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p.48.